

Sources of Confidence in School Community Councils

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Abstract

Three Utah middle level school community councils participated in a qualitative strengths-based process evaluation. Two of the school community councils were identified as exemplary, and the third was just beginning to function. One aspect of the evaluation was the source of school community council members' confidence. Each school had unique themes that emerged related to sources of confidence. The first middle school's SCC's sources of confidence were the opportunity to appropriate money, the investment of time and energy, and the witness of program impact. At the second middle school, confidence developed as a direct result of the principal's support of the process and members' full engagement in the school improvement process. Confidence at the third council came as the members were involved in the hiring of a new principal, and members also expressed that confidence would increase with more parent involvement. Through comparison and contrast, a common source of confidence emerged. It became clear that building confidence depends on the level of involvement in the school improvement process. A major theme of that involvement is the need for a balance between the democratic ideals of the council and the expertise of the professionals. The evaluation revealed that confidence results as an appropriate balance is achieved between democracy and expertise.

Key Words: school community councils, confidence, middle schools, teams, evaluations, principals, engagement, improvement, involvement, parents, parental, democratic, professionals, shared leadership, site-based, administrators

Introduction

Schools are integral parts of the communities they serve. As both schools and communities have evolved over time, a relationship between them exists, but the nature of this relationship can be highly variable (Crowson & Boyd, 2001). Public schools have the responsibility to serve public purposes (Bullough, 1988). As professional educators develop ideas of how best to serve public purposes, how does the community influence these ideas? Site-based school community councils have become widely used as an attempt to unite parents, teachers, administrators, and community members in a body to govern and monitor school improvement (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1991; Crowson & Boyd, 2001; Hess, 1999; Malen, 1999; Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

A school community council (SCC) has been legislatively required at each public school in the state of Utah since the year 2001 (Children's Land Alliance Supporting Schools, 2004). The school community councils are granted the responsibility to develop and implement the school improvement plan and the School Learning and Nurturing Development (LAND) Trust program plan. The School LAND Trust program provides relatively modest funds to the school to be used by the SCC for the purpose of improving student achievement. As school community councils have been established in Utah, there has been great variability in how they are implemented.

During a qualitative process evaluation of Utah's SCC program, three middle school level SCCs were evaluated to determine the level of legal compliance, the use of strategies and processes identified in the literature, and the perceived impact of the implementation of school improvement plans. One characteristic that was investigated in the evaluation was confidence, particularly what experiences built SCC member confidence that the work of the SCC would have a positive impact on student achievement. The purpose of this article is to present the findings of the evaluation related to the practices that yield the greatest confidence in SCC members.

Literature Review

The term *community* is a commonly used term in education today, and its use can take on several possible meanings (Fendler, 2006). In the case of Utah school community councils, the term *community* refers specifically to the combined group of school personnel, students, and parents and guardians of students at each school. The SCC is a parent majority group of elected representatives of the school community and includes the school principal as an ex

officio member. Utah is not alone in including school community councils in the work of school improvement. School community councils or similar local councils are politically popular across the nation and even internationally (Caines, 2006; Hawaii State Department of Education, 2005; Khan, 2005; Swift-Morgan, 2006; Talley & Keedy, 2006).

Some researchers have identified specific positive characteristics of shared decision-making in schools. Petress (2002) suggested that group decision-making should always utilize the principles of critical thinking, stakeholder involvement, and mutual support of the final decision. Effective decisions also require adequate, high-quality information available to all members of the group. Johnson and Pajares (1996) found that stakeholders' confidence, adequate resources, established democratic procedures, and principal support enhanced shared decision-making. These characteristics add elements of clarity, but the picture of exactly what an effective school community council does to increase student achievement is incomplete.

The most recent study to provide a picture of what a model SCC might look like studied three high-performance schools in an urban Kentucky school district including two high schools and an elementary school. This study found that the positive characteristics that built instructional capacity in a school were (a) principals sharing power, (b) a network of staff and parents engaged in problem solving, (c) use of data to focus on student achievement, and (d) collective accountability for student achievement (Talley & Keedy, 2006). Talley and Keedy provide the most clarity for what effective practice may look like, but while their study provides valuable information on what makes SCCs successful at the high school and elementary level, it begs the question of SCC success at the middle school level.

Method

The purpose of this study was to conduct a strengths-based process evaluation of Utah school community councils at the middle school level. A strengths-based approach examined the strengths of the selected programs that can be built upon as an alternative to a deficit model that is traditionally used to identify a problem that can be diagnosed and repaired. Through the qualitative strengths-based approach to a process evaluation, the focus was not on what was not working and why it was not working. Instead, the focus was on what was working especially well, why it was working well, and ideas were sought for making similar performance more common (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). A criticism of a strengths-based approach is the potential neglect of any serious problems that may exist; however, just because these problems are not the focus

does not mean they are neglected. Problems emerged and were addressed in the evaluation within each exemplary SCC as well as within the unexpected opportunity to evaluate a newly established SCC that possessed the desire but lacked the knowledge and experience of an exemplary SCC. “One characteristic of qualitative research is to represent multiple perspectives of individuals in order to represent the complexity of our world” (Creswell, 2002, p. 194). Including the fledgling case along with the exemplary cases provided the opportunity to learn more by intensively studying cases at extreme ends of the continuum of program implementation (Patton, 2002). By including the non-exemplary case, the exemplary characteristics became more pronounced. All cases contain strengths and weaknesses, and by studying cases with variation, the exemplary processes of program implementation are better understood. Using a strengths-based approach with the selected cases did expose weakness, but it sought to address those weaknesses through the strengths of the organization.

Data Collection

The term strengths-based is used to describe this process evaluation as a result of two important characteristics. First, a purposeful sampling was used to select middle level SCCs viewed as exemplary by the Utah State Office of Education staff with supervisory authority over SCCs. This follows from the desire to “learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). Second, interviews were conducted using an appreciative inquiry (AI) approach (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). The purpose of the appreciative approach was to collect data about SCCs most productive strategies and the peak experiences of participants. With an appreciative approach there is often a concern about a positive bias to the results; however, Preskill and Catsambas (2006) point out that positive and appreciative are not synonymous. Whereas positive questioning would be biased if it emphasized acceptance, approval, and what is liked about the program without questioning the negative perceptions, appreciative questions will get at the nature of achievement and solicit desires for increasing the value of the program.

Appreciative questions ask respondents to communicate their concept of the nature, worth, quality, and significance of a program or some aspect of the organization. Moreover, they ask respondents to honor the past while expressing gratitude for, and pride in, their achievements. And, the appreciative wishes questions invite respondents to share their ideas for how to increase the value of the program. Hence, the role of appreciative questions is not to learn what respondents liked, but rather to focus on the study of successful moments that can be used to grow and improve the program in the future. (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006, pp. 76-77)

An interview guide was developed to facilitate a comparison between the strategies of effective site-based management identified in the literature and the strategies used by the selected exemplary middle level SCCs. “Because appreciative interview questions focus on instances of success, peak experiences, values, and wishes, they tend to look and feel very different from non-AI questions” (Preskill & Catsambus, 2006, p. 79). To illustrate the difference, one characteristic that related to improved student achievement identified in the literature was the level of confidence members had that the work of the SCC influenced student achievement. A traditional interview question may ask, “How confident are you that the work of the SCC will influence student achievement?” or “What are some examples of SCC practices that have built your confidence in the program?” In contrast, the appreciative prompt used was, “Can you tell me about an instance when you felt great confidence that the work of the SCC would make a positive difference in student achievement in this school?” The appreciative prompt is then followed with an invitation to the participant to express his or her wishes for the program. Although the difference between the traditional and appreciative questions may be subtle, the appreciative questions prompt more detailed examinations of both successes and desires for improvement (Preskill & Catsambus, 2006).

Site Selection and Access

Schools were selected for participation in the evaluation based on three criteria: (a) recommendation by the School LAND Trust Program administration; (b) a stated focus on improving student achievement in core subjects in conjunction with the Utah Performance and Assessment System for Students (U-PASS) results demonstrating either consistent high achievement, consistent increases in achievement, or consistent progress with subgroups; and (c) a willingness to participate in the evaluation. In addition to the extreme case sampling, an opportunistic sampling was also used when the unexpected opportunity arose to select a school that provided a contrasting example (Creswell, 1998; Weiss, 1998).

The extreme case sampling criteria shaped the procedures for selecting the three initial schools. Originally, a non-exemplary case was desirable, but because participation in the evaluation was completely voluntary, it was implausible that a non-exemplary case would agree to participate, so three exemplary schools were selected. When one exemplary school contacted chose not to participate, the district research director invited another school that had not had a functioning SCC but was striving to get one functioning to participate, and they accepted, providing an unexpected opportunity (Creswell, 1998; Weiss, 1998). Once selected, the same evaluation procedures were used for all three schools.

Although the purpose of an SCC is established by law to develop and implement the school improvement plan and School LAND Trust program plan, there was variability in the implementation. Each case provided a different socioeconomic group from which the SCC was formed, and the make up of each council was slightly different. The first middle school (M1) was located in a predominantly upper- and middle-class community with a small minority population. M1's SCC consisted of the principal, four teachers, and six parents. The second middle school (M2) was located in a growing, mostly middle-class suburban community with a small minority population. M2's SCC consisted of the principal, a counselor, two teachers, and seven parents. The third middle school (M3) was located in an older community within a large city and was predominantly lower socioeconomic class. M3's SCC consisted of the principal, one teacher, two parents, and one community partner. A parent served as the chair at each of the three evaluated SCCs. The SCCs at M1 and M2 were well established and considered exemplary, and the SCC at M3 was recently established. All three schools were obtaining positive results in terms of student achievement as measured by the U-PASS report card. Annual elections for parent members were customary at M1 and M2; however, at M3's fledgling SCC, parents were invited to participate by the administration due to demonstrated interest. School personnel at all three schools served on a volunteer basis, but no formal elections took place for these positions.

There were three primary sources of data gathered—interviews, observations, and documents. All data gathering took place January 2008 through May 2008. The same general procedures were followed at each site, but the number and type of interviews, observations, and documents varied from case to case. Interviews were conducted in person or by telephone. Interview guides were emailed to SCC members prior to the interviews, so each member could think about their experiences and be prepared to provide the most meaningful responses. Each SCC member was interviewed one time for 30 to 45 minutes using the interview guide. Whether the interview occurred in person or over the telephone, each interview was recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were emailed to interviewees who responded with any corrections or clarifications.

Observations of SCC meetings took place at each site. Observation notes were taken at each meeting, and the audio of meetings was recorded and transcribed. Descriptive and reflective notes were taken directly on the agendas provided during the observations. Additional reflective notes were added to the recording immediately following the observations. These notes were transcribed along with the transcription of the meeting.

The documents collected at each site varied depending on SCC activities and document availability. For all schools, the School LAND Trust program plans for the past three years were obtained. Additional documents included SCC bylaws, survey results, meeting minutes, and school improvement plans.

The total participation at M1 consisted of the principal (SCC member), the assistant principal (not an SCC member), five parents (all SCC members), and nine teachers (three of which were SCC members); M2 participation consisted of the principal (SCC member), a counselor (SCC member), eight teachers (two of which were SCC members), one staff member (not an SCC member), and five parents (all SCC members); M3 participation consisted of the principal (SCC member), two teachers (one of which was a SCC member), two parents (SCC members), and a community partner (SCC member).

Data Analysis

As a lone evaluator in this qualitative study, I served as an instrument of data collection and data analysis. My background, experiences, and interest in the topic of school community councils stemmed from my work as a Utah public school assistant principal and SCC member prior to conducting the study. As I began the evaluation, I had a job change that took me from the state of Utah to teach mathematics at the college level. This change created both challenges to and strengths for the evaluation. The move removed me from the state of Utah, which made the logistics of getting into the schools and conducting the study more challenging. However, the change also served to allow me to step back and approach the evaluation much more objectively. Originally, I had wanted to learn what other schools were doing so we could improve the practices at my school. With my job change, the evaluation was no longer about how I could improve my own school through improving our school community council, it was about learning as much as possible from the selected schools, so all schools can benefit from the experiences of the exemplary schools. I had no personal or professional relationship with any of the participants of the evaluation prior to conducting the evaluation.

For data analysis, an inductive approach was utilized. Creswell (2002) outlines the steps for analyzing qualitative data: (a) organize data, (b) explore data, (c) identify themes, (d) represent and report findings, (e) interpret findings, and (f) validate findings. Although these are listed as steps, the analysis process is both “simultaneous and iterative” (p. 257). The processes overlapped and cycled back and forth through the entire analysis, utilizing a constant comparative analysis for each research question at each site.

Throughout the process I sought to be as objective as possible and to let the participants tell the story of their school community council. Through

interviews, observations, and documents, participants were able to explain what was working, why they thought it was working, and whether they thought it was making a difference. Themes emerged at each site as well as across sites. The insights provided are important to building an understanding of school community councils.

Results and Analysis

When asking whether an SCC member was confident that the SCC was making a difference, a common response was, “I wouldn’t choose to be involved if I wasn’t confident it would be meaningful.” Yet, when the appreciative prompt was used to ask participants to share experiences that have helped build that confidence, members at each school were able to identify and share different experiences that served as sources for their confidence. Data from the three sites will be shared to provide a picture of the experiences that built SCC member confidence.

M1

The data from M1 demonstrated three primary sources for building confidence. First, confidence was built by having the opportunity to decide how to spend available money to implement effective programs. Second, confidence was built by investing time and energy in the SCC process. Third, confidence was built by seeing the implemented programs impact students.

The Opportunity to Appropriate Money

A parent and first-year SCC member commented:

Sometimes it’s rather intangible, what the community council does, but when we have been able to vote and purchase tools that will help be in place and help next year’s kids, I would say that made—the more hands on experience there—probably is what gave me more confidence that we were helping the kids.

Another parent member was reluctant to admit that the money made a difference when she commented, “I almost hate to have this be my confidence thing, but this is the times that I have felt like, ‘Yeah, we’re going to make an impact.’ It truly is when we have spent some of the Trust LAND money.” Another member spoke of the process of deciding to devote a large portion of the available funds to an after-school tutoring program called the “homework club.” A couple of teachers had started to provide some after-school tutoring. They were donating their own time. It was an inconsistent program, so the teachers went before the SCC with their concerns, needs, and vision. The SCC decided

to include the homework club in the school improvement plan. They chose to use the LAND trust funds to pay teachers to supervise and tutor students in the homework club. Several members of the SCC cited the process behind choosing to fund the homework club and learning of its impact as a specific instance that built great confidence. In the case of the homework club, SCC members' confidence grew as they used available funds to provide a program they perceived would impact student learning.

In addition to responding to questions about what experiences have built confidence, SCC members were also asked what they thought would increase their confidence further. The suggestions included funding issues. One member stated, "I would like to see us use our LAND Trust money in a way that hits a broader cross section of the kids." Another member discussed how programs could be developed beyond the core academic subjects that would still have a meaningful and important impact on student achievement if more funding were available.

Investing Time and Energy

A second contributing factor to building confidence was investing time and energy in the process. One M1 parent SCC member talked about the process of developing the school improvement plan:

That's one of the more tedious parts about the Community Council. It's really slow work, and we do this continually. We always have the school improvement plan in front of us....At first, I was feeling like—very tedious, slow work. Now, I can see it is a really great base of guidelines for all of us to work around. When a parent comes in with a request or a complaint or something we can go, "Oh, we have that in our works. That's one of our goals."

As this parent explained, the actual work the SCC conducts might often seem tedious and time consuming, but at the same time the process actually builds confidence that the work is meaningful. SCC meetings provided observed evidence that these SCC members work extremely hard discussing goals, reviewing survey results, and listening to proposals to inform their decisions. For example, the SCC spent 45 minutes of one observed meeting reviewing the results of a survey of students, parents, and faculty. During this time the members were actively engaged in the discussion of survey results.

A teacher SCC member cited another discussion that built confidence:

We examined test scores and spent a lot of time talking about the achievement gap between our ELL students, low-income, and the rest of the student population. At some point, we said, "Okay, we are doing almost everything we can to help these students and close the gap a little

bit. What else are we doing to reach all students?" And that was very encouraging to me that we could have that shift in the conversation where it just wasn't doom and gloom while looking at these numbers but also saying, "Hey, things are actually going well in all these other brackets."

The same teacher member cited an open and honest dialogue that took place in an SCC meeting as building his confidence in the process. The teacher wanted to know what evidence existed that the decisions being made by the SCC had any impact on improving student performance.

"Do all of these programs that we are investing so much time and money in really effect student achievement directly or is it just something that is a stamp on our letterhead and makes us feel better about ourselves?" It was at that point that [the principal] started to bring up research and showed us that all these programs and things that we are doing do actually tie to student achievement. At that point there was a little more buy in from me. At that point I was ready to think, "Let's support this." Because in the past, I just felt like, "This is a waste of time and money."

By investing time in open and honest dialogue, confidence in the process was built. Another parent member looked at this type of dialogue and concluded, "The principal has a very good command of how the students are achieving. His knowledge has instilled great confidence in the process." The SCC members gained a great appreciation and respect for the principal's knowledge as they spent time in the long meetings.

Other evidence that the investment of time and energy in the process builds confidence came from the suggestions the members made for building confidence. Several times members would say that it took half of their first year to figure out the SCC's purpose and procedures.

Seeing Program Impact

A third category that built M1 SCC member confidence came from seeing the impact of the SCC decisions. In the third category, SCC members commented on how seeing decisions impact students had built confidence, and several members suggested that seeing more evidence of how SCC decisions were impacting students would build more confidence.

The principal talked about how the confidence has come in making decisions that show great promise for impacting student learning. One of the programs included in the school improvement plan was the International Baccalaureate (IB) Middle Years Programme (MYP). The principal said,

The SCC saw the value of the IB MYP...and that's an approach and philosophy that over time is going to make a lot of difference for a lot

of kids....They are all going to be taught once we get these things truly ingrained in mind set and practices. They will all be taught with that philosophy and framework, and I think that's going to be a really good thing.

The members expressed a strong desire to know if the plans they are implementing are having an impact. "We can't track individual students but are hoping to start tracking groups of students over the next few years. I think that would help a lot to see if what we are doing has any effect." Several talked about the need to track a group of low-achieving students over time and see if the programs being implemented at M1 are having an impact on student achievement.

One parent member indicated that the evidence of impact needed to go beyond the numbers on a report. She first indicated that she wanted to know how particular programs were helping students. She also expressed a need to see the impact in a more personal way by actually observing programs and tools implemented in the classroom or talking with teachers and students and hearing how their teaching and learning were personally affected. She said, "It's all numbers and paper, and it just seems a little hands off. I feel more productive if I'm more involved."

There were various incidents cited as building confidence at M1, but appropriating money to implement programs, investing time and energy in the process, and learning about the impact of the programs are the general themes throughout the specific instances discussed or observed.

M2

There were two broad yet interconnected sources of confidence expressed by members of the M2 SCC. The first was the principal's leadership, and the second was the SCC members' involvement in the entire process. SCC members expressed great appreciation for the principal of M2 and for the privilege of making decisions based on data, seeing the programs implemented, witnessing the results, and being free to question the practices.

Principal Support

A parent SCC member spoke of the principal, "We usually, I think, as a whole of the SCC have great confidence in his [the principal's] ideas because he lets us know so much about what is going on in the school that we are all on the same page." Another parent member said, "I have to say, [the principal] is really good and what he brings to us and the freedom. He lets us go with what we want to do or what we feel is best." The counselor SCC member also spoke of the confidence that comes from the principal by comparing his experience at M2 with a previous SCC experience at a different school:

Well, let me do a comparison here. At [another middle school] they [school administrators] would present different options and different things like that, but it was more of a head nodding session of this is what the principal wanted to do. This is what they were interested in doing, and basically, this is what we are doing, and you're here to give approval on it. There was no dissension, basically, allowed. Any time you dissented, it was not necessarily a favorable type of situation. Hence, one of the reasons why I came to [M2]. With [the M2 principal], one of the things that I have a lot of confidence in is that he is willing to put out there, "This is what I think, but you know what, you guys can vote me down on this." And a few times the community council has said, "You know what, can we look at a different avenue?...Can we look at doing a different thing here?" Or they question, "Is this an effective program?"

As members discussed how the principal supported the SCC, they elaborated and identified several principal practices that resulted in confidence that the work they do as a school community council does make a positive difference to student achievement. Three principal practices that increased SCC member confidence were (a) the principal shared data, (b) the principal supported the SCC even when he did not initially agree, and (c) the principal respected the SCC members as leaders.

In a review of the minutes for the SCC meetings over the past four years, one could see that data were presented in nearly every meeting. Several tables were illustrated in most SCC meeting minutes. The counselor SCC member described how the principal used data:

Oh, we are huge on data in this school. I run weekly reports as far as the I [incomplete grades] list, and [the principal] will go back, and he has shown this where he has several years of how our students have done, and he will present that very regularly to the community council....We are a huge data driven school. In fact, I never realized how useful the data can be until I was here, and I saw how effectively [the principal] used it.

Knowing the principal is giving the complete data picture, the SCC members gained confidence in the principal. As a parent member put it, "We know that he isn't going to lie to us how well they are doing. He puts the data up there, and this is what it is." Whether the data showed improvement or not, he shared the information. The use of data in the SCC lead to decisions concerning programs. One parent member commented,

I think that we know so much that is going on in the school that when it comes time to spend money on the Trust LANDs, we can say, "In all of this data you have given us, we still see that science is low, and science

isn't coming up as fast as the other ones, so let's get a mobile lab for the science classes."

Another parent member explained, "As you see the improvements, you think, okay it's working, so it leads you to take the next step."

The principal also built confidence in the SCC members by supporting their decisions. The minutes demonstrate that the principal made most of the recommendations for programs and purchases, but the principal also made it clear that the SCC had the liberty to make the final decision. One example of how the principal supported the SCC member decisions occurred when the parents wanted to provide a late bus one day a week, so students could stay after school to work with teachers to increase student achievement. The principal was reluctant to spend funds on buses, not being convinced it would be beneficial. Through the process of discussion and investigation, concerns were addressed and funds were also secured to ensure that teachers would be available after school to help students who stayed late. As a result, the late buses were included in the school improvement plan, the budget was adjusted, and the School LAND Trust program for the 2007-2008 school year funded the late buses. The principal supported the SCC members in the decisions made even though he did not initially agree. Providing this kind of support to a program initiated by the SCC increased the members' confidence that the decisions they make can influence student achievement.

The third way the principal built confidence at M2 was by respecting the SCC members as leaders. The minutes from the February 2007 SCC meeting read:

As we are beginning to look forward to the 2007-08 school year, [the principal] has asked for the council to start thinking of possibilities for the Trust LANDs money and how it should be spent. He has requested for the council to come with ideas to be presented at the next meeting in March.

The counselor SCC member explained:

Now with that money, [the principal] usually has some ideas, "This is what I would like to use it towards." And he's pretty specific with that, you know, "This is what I would like to use it for." But then parents or teachers or whoever can question that, "Well would it be better..."

A parent member said, "I have to say, [the principal] is really good and what he brings to us and the freedom. He lets us go with what we want to do or what we feel is best."

Parent members were able to express concerns and knew that the principal took their concerns very seriously. The principal explained:

You have to have shared leadership. You are going to have the best results when you really do have shared leadership....in some of the other schools...the principal set the agenda, the chair showed up and said, "That looks good," and they moved forward....It's important that that chair knows they have a voice. And if they don't like what is on the agenda as the parent chair, and I always want my chair to be a parent.... So when the agendas are set there is a parent perspective and a school perspective.

The principal played an important role in the M2 SCC. He was the primary source of confidence as he was open and honest in providing data to inform decisions. He listened to parent SCC member concerns, understanding that they were the voice of the people they represented. The SCC members in turn had more confidence in the principal and the SCC process because of the mutual respect with the principal. The principal supported the process even when the SCC members led things in a different direction than he proposed, and he respected the SCC members as leaders.

Engaged in School Improvement Process

The process of school improvement in which the SCC engaged was the second main source of confidence. This is closely related to the principal's support as he facilitated the way in which M2 worked together as a professional learning community. The M2 process was best demonstrated through an instance described by SCC members in interviews and documented in meeting minutes and observations.

In the February 2008 SCC meeting, proposals for the 2008-2009 School LAND Trust budget included \$13,000 to continue funding the license for the writing software. SCC members questioned the accuracy of the software in grading the papers. The principal wanted the teachers who used the program to be able to respond to the SCC member concerns, so he scheduled two English teachers to attend the next meeting and discuss the program. He also asked the parent members to ask their constituents how they felt about the program.

At the following meeting in March 2008, the English department chair and an English teacher visited the SCC meeting as representatives of teachers who use the writing program. The teachers presented the case for how the program was being used and why it should be continued, and the parents had the opportunity to express their concerns. The potential for conflict was evident by the postures of parents sitting forward and attentive even when not talking and the teachers coming prepared with a handout, but there was very little conflict evident in the discussion itself. Many questions were addressed during the hour the visiting teachers were at the meeting, and the discussion continued after the

teachers left the meeting. The next month at the April 2008 SCC meeting, the funding of the writing software was approved unanimously.

The process of questioning the writing program, hearing the teachers' perspectives, reviewing the data, and then making an informed decision to continue the program was cited by several SCC members interviewed as building confidence in the SCC process. A parent member expressed appreciation that "the teachers were able to give us as community and parents a view of this program, how it works, and why we should keep it." Referring to the discussion on the writing software, another parent said, "That, I think, was a good instance of us working together to find the best thing that we are going to spend this money on and is it worth it." The counselor member of the SCC described the whole process and then said,

That's when I have great confidence. If there are questions, [the principal] doesn't necessarily say, "Well, this is the best way." Instead he says, "Well, let's bring in some people who are experts here and see what is the best way here."

At M2, confidence was developed through similar experiences involving teacher-parent collaboration meetings, the late bus program, and a schoolwide mastery program. In each instance, all SCC members were able to engage in questioning proposals, obtain expert opinions, openly discuss, and members were empowered to make the decisions. Of critical importance to building confidence in the M2 SCC was the principal's leadership in supporting the SCC and the members' engagement in the school improvement process.

M3

As the SCC at M3 was in its first year of functioning, there was relatively little experience among members, so when asked to identify what has built the most confidence and what would build more confidence, the responses were very similar among all members. There was one specific activity cited as having built confidence and one desire expressed for building confidence in the future.

During the evaluation period, the M3 principal accepted a position in another school district for the following year. The SCC participated in the hiring process for the new principal. This involvement in the hiring process was the activity most mentioned as building SCC parent member confidence. The community partner SCC member serving in a parent position explained:

At first, they [school district] were just going to appoint a principal and not allow the parents and the community to go through the interview process. My role as the parent person was—because of the knowledge and

the understanding of the process—I was able to work with the School Community Council chair to request the process be given to [M3] because all the other middle schools had been able to go through that process rather than have a principal appointed. So, indirectly, that impacts student achievement, because if we can't find somebody to follow in [the principal's] footsteps—because he has brought the school so far—our achievements will go down because he has brought that school a long ways, and the parents want the same type of principal coming in.

The SCC minutes for March 2008 show that the SCC formed a principal selection committee of 10 people including parents and school personnel. They also worked closely with the exiting principal and district personnel to establish important criteria for hiring the new principal. A parent SCC member spoke of the confidence the hiring process built: "As that process [hiring new principal] started, and a committee needed to be formed—that was the moment when the SCC was recognized and was actually functioning and doing something." Another parent member, when asked about an instance that built confidence, said,

Our principal is leaving, and we are having a new principal come in, and the School Community Council being involved in the selection committee for the new principal is hugely important. I don't know what could have a bigger impact on the school than a new principal, and we're going to be a part of that. That is definitely the answer I would have for that.

When asked what would increase confidence, the most common response at M3 was more parent involvement. A teacher SCC member discussed the challenges to greater parent member involvement in the M3 SCC:

I think we actually do have a couple of parents who are now at this time really willing to take on the responsibility and make it functional. I think it's—middle school in general is very difficult because it's just such a short period of time. The parents don't have a lot of vested interest in it. I think as far as the staff, it's just been so hard to get it up and functioning that it's just kind of a process that is not being used, because the process hasn't really been in place. I think there is certainly a willingness to allow that process to happen and encouragement of parental involvement. I think that we're just in a really stressed environment in our area, and it takes a toll on people's personal time to be able to commit to do that. And I also think that a lot of parents want to participate, but they don't really know how, and I don't think a lot of them have the skills or the confidence to be able to take a role like this on and really know what their role would be and how to function in that role.

The principal confirmed the perception when he said:

I understand the law wanting to get parents involved, especially on the shared government and decision-making on the school level, because that School Community Council is where all the stakeholders are present and that is a very vital function. But most of my parents are so engrossed in the day-to-day survival mode that it's difficult for them to get here.

With those challenges, when asked what he thought would build confidence, the principal said, "I think the numbers of our parents. I need probably about three or four more good parents. That is [the SCC chairman's] and my goal, and then I think we will be set, and I think it's going to happen." The teacher SCC member who explained the challenges went on to say,

I think that if the parents come on board that the school—the school probably isn't 100% on board because there hasn't been, like I said, the environment for them to go through the process, but I think that having opportunities for parents—to know that this opportunity is available and to be able to support and train them and make leadership opportunity available for them would help the SCC.

When a parent SCC member was asked what she would like to see happen to build the confidence that the SCC was really helping students, she replied:

That's a tough one. Just more parent involvement. There are a thousand kids in that building, and right now the most involved parents in that school is maybe three. And that's not nearly enough representation. I would like to see more parents becoming involved and having a voice.

M3 was a fledgling SCC, and as such was a sharp contrast to the exemplary SCCs. Even as the M3 SCC was establishing itself, the experience of being a full participant in the process of hiring a new principal built great confidence. The desires of the SCC members also showed evidence that a deeper investment of time and energy by more parents in the SCC process would build greater confidence.

Discussion

If an SCC is to positively contribute to school leadership, it is essential that SCC members have confidence that their involvement will make a difference. As SCC members shared confidence-building experiences, common themes emerged. The first dominant theme that built confidence was full involvement in the decision making process, which required an investment of time, energy, and ample resources in the process of making decisions that would have an

impact on student achievement. A second theme that emerged was the importance of strong principal leadership dedicated to supporting the democratic process and maintaining focus on student achievement. These themes regarding middle schools are similar to the findings of Petress (2002), Johnson and Pajares (1996), and Talley and Keedy (2006).

Some have criticized the prominent role the principal plays in a site-based council (Malen & Vincent, 2008). Yet, confidence at all three schools was a direct result of principal actions. The principals were all strong leaders and had dominant roles in their respective SCCs. Even with the dominant role, SCC members felt a strong level of trust in the principals. As expressed at M2, there was a feeling that the principal was completely honest. “He gives us the good, the bad, and the ugly—everything.” The prevalence of data provided by the principal informs the SCC members, so they understand the needs of the school. This demonstrates that the principal holds the key to empowering the SCC to make meaningful decisions.

In contrast, at M3, SCC members provided evidence of one practice that erodes confidence. Parents were asked to sign off on plans when they did not participate in the development of the plans. Disappointment was expressed as one member responded to a question about the implementation of a school program: “I wish I could tell you a lot about that. My exposure was ‘here’s the paper work, and we need you to sign it.’” The few active members of the SCC, including the principal, all recognized that the SCC provides an excellent avenue for increasing parent voice in the process, but work remains to build the confidence desired by participants.

The SCC process at the evaluated middle schools demonstrates the importance of full participation of all SCC members. SCC member confidence at the evaluated schools was built as the SCC members became fully engaged in the process of developing plans and taking action for the purpose of school improvement. A theme that emerged at the core of the SCC process was the need for balance between professional and democratic control.

The evaluation revealed an appreciation for SCCs introducing a type of democratic process into the evaluated public schools, and at the same time, the evaluation emphasized an appreciation for the knowledge and dedication of the professionals—the principals in particular. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer (2005) wrote about this balance between professional and democratic control, which provides insight for the SCC process:

How can we reconcile democratic control of government with the technical nature of modern life? The former calls for decision-making by citizens or their elected representatives, the latter for decision-making by administrators or experts. If we delegate too much decision-making

authority to experts, administration and democracy conflict. We lose control. Yet if we delegate too little authority, we also find democracy weakened. To achieve our democratically chosen ends in a modern populous society requires some amount of administration, involving administrative, not democratic decision-making. To achieve those same ends in a technologically advanced society requires expertise. The average citizen normally lacks the time, knowledge, and experience necessary to understand certain technical matters....Without delegation to experts, an inexpert public, possessing the will, would lack the way. The public understands this fact....To reconcile democratically chosen ends with administrative expertise requires striking a balance—some delegation, but not too much. The right balance avoids conflict between democracy and administration....How to strike that balance? That is the mystery. (pp. 102-103)

The three middle schools evaluated are striving to strike that balance. The SCCs are a key decision-making body for the schools, but to make the decisions they need to make, the SCC relies heavily on the expertise of the school principals. The evaluated SCCs each had school principals who demonstrated support of the democratic process by inviting participation, sharing data, and making proposals that could positively influence student learning. These principal practices were great sources of confidence. Malen and Vincent (2008) observe that the strength of professional control is intact regardless of the attempts to empower parents through school councils. The current evaluation does support the observation that the professionals do have great control over the decisions made, but in light of Justice Breyer's observation, the SCC does provide an important democratic balance to the professional control.

As demonstrated at M2, when the parent SCC members questioned the use of the writing software, the SCC did provide a venue for a more democratic process to take place. The writing software experience also demonstrated how the democratic process relies on expertise and data to inform the decisions. The parents each had a small view of the writing program through the lens of their own children and hearsay. Making a democratic decision based on the information they initially had would simply have been irresponsible. The principal did not possess the expertise on the writing program either, so he arranged to have the teachers who actually use the program to come and present. When the teachers presented to the SCC, they did not come in as individuals, but as representatives of a larger teacher group who used the program. The expertise and data brought by the teachers informed the democratic decision to continue the use of the program. The democratic influence also caused the teachers to consider and make adjustments based on the concerns raised.

The parent SCC members, as volunteers who spent three hours in an SCC meeting each month and with many other responsibilities, could not be expected to have a level of expertise to make the best decisions without reliance upon experts. The SCC members could question and even reject the proposal, but to make an informed decision the SCC relied heavily on the expertise of and data from the professionals. When professionals and citizens work together in deliberative problem solving, trust can be built and mutual cooperation can develop (Fung, 2004).

As SCC members, both professionals and volunteers, worked together to make a positive difference at their school, few things built confidence more than seeing their decisions result in greater student achievement. Student achievement, after all, is the primary responsibility of an SCC, but the common understanding is that a causal link between SCCs and student achievement is problematic (Malen & Vincent, 2008; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998a). Although the decisions made by the SCC may not cause improved student achievement, it is quite possible that the purchases and programs chosen by SCC decisions could have a measurable impact on student achievement. Deliberate research is called for to further examine the connections between SCC decisions and improved student achievement. It would be valuable to study more extensively various SCC decisions, the subsequent programs and practices used, and the resulting impact on student achievement.

Although limited to three middle school SCCs in the state of Utah, this evaluation demonstrated how confidence in the SCC process can be built as parents become fully involved in the democratic process and as administrators and professionals openly and honestly share their expertise.

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THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY JOURNAL

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